The Virgin Birth

By

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The Virgin Birth

THE DOCTRINE of the Virgin Birth is that Jesus was born of the Maid Mary, without the agency of a human father, by the creative energy of the Holy Spirit. For years back this has been one of the points of fire in theological discussion. The historico-critical school, with its repudiation of the supernatural in the life of our Lord, with its revamped Christianity purged of miracle and mystery, has thrown this article of the Church's testimony into the limbo of things abandoned. In addition to naturalistic writers, there are those who in a diluted sense accept the Incarnation and yet dismiss offhand as untenable the miraculous conception of Jesus and wish to have it deleted from the Creed. And there are men holding to a still more orthodox Christology who treat this subject with gingerly discretion or refer to it in language of doubt. Both of these last-mentioned classes esteem the unique mode by which Jesus is reported to have begun His bodily existence as unessential to faith. Dr. Lyman Abbott spoke for them when he declared the question to be "of no serious importance." Manifestly

the Virgin Birth is among those Christian facts over which, in this day of dragging anchors, of drift from ancient moorings, we must maintain an unremitting guard. Because it is beyond the horizon of biology and modern materialism, and at the same time is alleged to lack credible evidence, it is freely given up to denial or listed as insecure.

The argument against the authenticity of the Virgin Birth has been so built up that at first blush it looks formidable. The narrative is found in the introductory chapters of two only of our Gospels, the First and Third. That is all; there is no allusion to the event elsewhere in the New Testament. It is ignored by the Evangelists Mark and John, Mark's silence proving that it was not in the common Synoptic tradition. It had no place in the earliest apostolic preaching as preserved in the Book of Acts. The twenty-one Epistles and the Apocalypse betray no acquaintance with it. Moreover, the accounts of the Wonder Birth in Matthew and Luke are divergent to the degree that they are irreconcilable, and within each of these two Gospels the story after it is once told has no later echoes of any kind. Jesus Himself never intimated that He was not born naturally, and in the Gospels, those of the

Infancy included, there are clear inconsistencies with the Virgin Birth: Joseph and Mary are made the parents of Jesus and He is called the son of Joseph; the genealogies represent Jesus as a literal blood-descendant of David through Joseph; Mary gives Jesus a motherly scolding at His first visit to the Temple and later is ready to believe Him mentally unhinged—actions incompatible with any such memory as that of her Son's extraordinary birth. All these considerations demonstrate, we are told, that the Virgin Birth is a fiction, traceable in suggestion to this quarter or that. Those who framed the fabulous story were persuaded that what they were writing was substantially true. The Supernatural Conception was an easy inference from Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy, or it had its footing in the old-time mythological tales where persons of distinction were begotten by the gods in intercourse with mortal women. Thinking of the unexampled personality of Jesus and the stupendous issues of His life and teaching, there were certain in the primitive Christian community who were led to postulate for Him an origin in keeping therewith. Their fabrication in its twofold form was either incorporated by the Evangelists Matthew and Luke in their respective Gospels or interpolated at a sub-

sequent date in correspondence with a growing demand for the edification of the man Jesus.

By such reasoning the Virgin Birth is brushed aside. Two alternatives remain: Jesus was born of Joseph and Mary in lawful wedlock or He was an illegitimate. The former of these has been the common view among those rejecting the Virgin Birth. Today it is held by the majority of Jews, by Unitarians, and by liberal Christians who have quit the evangelical faith. The second of the alternates, however, has been shamelessly advocated. This abhorrent caricature of the Virgin Birth was invented by the Jews back in the second century for polemical purposes, owing to the difficulties which they felt in opposing the Davidic descent of Jesus as claimed by the Church. At that time and afterwards it was industriously circulated in the synagogues, and it appears in the Talmudic literature. In this blasphemy the canonical Infancy story was followed so far that Joseph's non-paternity was granted; but then it was said that Mary became pregnant by a seducer, one Panthera, a Roman military officer. The name Panthera was probably a studied distortion of *parthenos*, 'maiden.' This foul Jewish aspersion on the

virgin-motherhood of Mary was taken up by Celsus, a pagan philosopher of the second century. The older rationalism fell in eagerly with it, and it still survives in the coarser ranks of modern infidelity. Voltaire voiced it with scurrilous indecency. Tolstoi, in his volume *The Four Gospels*, repeats it, speaking of "the disgraceful birth of Jesus." And recently it has been blazoned abroad through the notorious outpourings of Prof. Haeckel, the German biologist, in *The Riddle of the Universe*. This vulgar calumny not only shocks religious feeling but challenges every just notion of the overruling providence of God. Can we refer the moral and spiritual renewal of the world to one born in sin? Jesus, with His Divine traits; Jesus, the central figure in the everlasting gospel; Jesus, Whose significance is as racial as the hunger for God and righteousness; Jesus, humanity's lone hope; Jesus, Who crowns life with its best blessings—is His birth to be dragged through the mire of lawless lust? Was He the bastard son of an unchaste mother? Perish the thought. Such a monstrous anomaly is simply impossible. Dismissing this ugly profanity, there remains the claim of destructive criticism that our Lord's Virgin Birth is the pious invention of early Christian imagination, that He

was born in the normal way, His parents being Joseph and Mary.

What shall we say to these things? The stubborn outstanding fact is that two of our Gospels, the only two that deal with the birth of Jesus, contain the testimony that He was born of the Virgin Mary by the direct action of the Holy Spirit. These strikingly independent narratives in Matthew and Luke are the sole account of the Nativity of Jesus that we have, and they agree in declaring that the "body prepared for Him" was conceived miraculously. If they are not believable, we know nothing at all of the circumstances of our Lord's birth. The issue, therefore, narrows itself to the credibility of these records. Are they trustworthy? The genuineness and authenticity of the two Gospels in general are assumed without argument. But what of the Infancy narratives? Were they in the original edition of these Gospels, or are they later alien insertions? The answer is that they are present in all the manuscripts, uncial and cursive, and in all the ancient versions. Not a single early writer gives us ground for thinking that these two Gospels as he had them differed from those in our Bibles—except, indeed, the heretic Marcion, who mutilated the Gospel of Luke to make

it fit his crooked ideas about the Person of Christ.

Internal evidence reinforces the documentary. Prof. Schmiedel and others allege cleavage between the Joseph genealogy in Matthew and the Birth story which follows; but the two hang together perfectly. Notwithstanding the Divine conception of Jesus, He was the reputed and acknowledged son of Joseph, and from a Jewish standpoint Joseph's lineage was the only way for Jesus to have a legal genealogy. Besides, the use of the genealogy may have had an apologetic motive. In the introduction of the three women, Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba (Ruth, while pure, was a heathen), the Evangelist may have aimed at silencing any possible insinuation against the honor of Mary. Even in the Davidic genealogy women of stained life played a role, while Mary's character, as is made plain, was unimpeachable. How, then, were slanderous flings at her and Jesus in Jewish circles justified? With a royal house having such a soiled history, Jews could not afford to throw stones at Christians. From both of the foregoing points of view the genealogy in Matthew is a proper prelude to the Birth-Narrative. With regard to the opening chapters in Luke, it

has been shown by eminent New Testament authorities that, while their contents are strongly Hebraic, and reveal early sources of knowledge, they are the work of Luke and are of a literary piece with the rest of his Gospel.

In the effort to condemn these two accounts as interpolations a perverse hypercriticism asserts that they are marked by mutual inconsistencies which cannot be harmonized. So testifies Prof. Usener in *The Encyclopaedia Biblica.* It is true that they are independent and are developed along individual lines. They come from men of very different habits and temperaments and with differing intentions. Matthew's report is from the standpoint of Joseph because of the theocratic emphasis in his Gospel, because he would convince the Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Luke, who wrote for the Gentile world, and who had the instinct of a practicing physician, selected the story of the Nativity as it came from Mary, and gives the actual genealogy of Jesus through His mother. Yet, in spite of all this, the two accounts supplement each other, and their variations involve no discrepancies. Dr. Oscar Holtzmann, an advanced critic, in his recent Life of Jesus, says: "A contradic-

tion between these narratives of Matthew and Luke does not exist." Dr. James Orr sums up no less than twelve points in which they coincide, and demonstrates that no statement in either is negatived by a fair reading of the other. Bishop Westcott declares that "the separate details are exactly capable of harmonious adjustment." We turn the tables, therefore, on those who with gross prejudice have taxed these Gospels with being mutually exclusive. The Birth story is written as we should most have wished to have it—from the respective viewpoints of Joseph and of Mary, and the two narratives, being manifestly distinct, doubly attest the supernatural birth of Jesus.

While admitting Luke's Infancy sketch as a whole, there are those who take exception to verses 34 and 35 of the first chapter, the verses in which the Virgin Birth is stated. The omission of these words is urged on the ground that they break the connection, which otherwise would run smoothly. This we answer with a decided negative. These verses dovetail perfectly into the context both before and after. Luke's entire story is underlaid with the idea that when Christ was born His mother was a virgin. Joseph

plays not the smallest part in the mystery of Jesus; Mary is in the foreground. Further, the context is to the effect that the announcement of Gabriel is of something wonderful, and the advent of an exceptional personage is implied. Some critics reject the thirty-fourth verse because Mary's question appears out of place under her circumstances as one looking forward to marriage. Why, since she was betrothed, should she display astonishment at the prospect of bearing a son? But the apparent strangeness of her question disappears when we consider the state of agitation and perplexity which the visit and the tidings of the angel would naturally produce. She seems, too, to have imagined an immediate fulfillment of the promise, an immediate conception, and this, in her present maiden condition, she could not understand. It may be added that in a concocted story Mary's rejoinder to the angel would have avoided this surface difficulty. As it stands, the artlessness of her question is a proof of truthfulness, is a fact in which truth completes itself. Aside from contextual justification, it is very improbable that an early redactor of the Third Gospel, setting out to exploit the figment of the Virgin Birth by interpolation, would have put such a re-

straint on his inventive genius as to content himself with two lone verses.

Then for this hypothesis there is no manuscript basis. These verses are retained as ındubitably genuine by the most distinguished editors of the Greek New Testament, both in England and Germany. Verse 34 is omitted in one codex of the Latin version, but that arises apparently from a confusion of the text, and anyhow no canon of textual science would warrant the rejection of a passage on such beggarly authority. As for verse 35, not only is there no evidence for its omission, but it is one of the earliest supported verses in the New Testament, being quoted by Justin Martyr. It is plain, therefore, that the criticism which adjudges these verses to be interpolated is purely subjective and arbitrary. If passages are to be expunged after that fashion, the method might be followed until little of the Gospel narratives would remain. Were the upholders of orthodox doctrine to indulge in such capricious text emendation, they would be laughed to scorn; and we have an equal right to be contemptuous. There are fixed rules of evidence and established principles of textual criticism, and it is not legitimate to ignore these rules and play fast and loose with these

principles, even for the sake of dislodging an article of the Christian creed. Anent the interpolation resort, it is apropos to cite Augustine. In one of his vigorous metaphors he describes the plea of interpolation as "the last gasp of a heretic in the grip of truth."

We have seen that the narratives of the Virgin Birth belong to the original text of Matthew and Luke, that they were not interpolated by later hands. Let us now weigh the claim that, embedded as they are in these Gospels, they are yet of mythical character. Through reflection on the pre-eminent Christ there sprang up in the early Christian circle the thought of a birth in keeping with His exalted person and mission, and this crystallized into the romantic stories found in Matthew and Luke. These stories are modeled on the wonder births of heroes and great men common in the folk-lore of Babylonia, Greece, and India, or else they had their starting-point in Isaiah's Immanuel passage or in other suggestive Scripture sources. It is significant that there are thirteen or fourteen theories of this kind, and that most of these varieties collide with one another; their authors are at loggerheads.

Turning to the birth-myths of heathenism, such as are given in Prof. Rhys Davids'

Buddhist Birth Stories, their existence is in itself no argument against the solid historicity of the miraculous birth of Jesus. Rather might it be contended that in these legendary tales, as in heathen forecasts of the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of a Saviour, the ethnic world was dreaming of great things yet to be, was voicing its dim prevision of what was realized at Nazareth and Bethlehem.

As against pagan birth-myths having any source-relation to the Gospel stories, it is abundantly evident that the narratives of the Nativity are Jewish-Christian through and through. Dr. Bacon, of Yale, says: "The basal fact for every student of these chapters of Matthew and Luke is that they are Hebrew to the core. This is simply fatal to all comparison with heathen mythology." Dr. Harnack, while he counts the Virgin Birth legendary, also knocks its pagan derivation in the head: "Nothing that is mythological in the sense of Greek or Oriental myth is to be found in these accounts; all here is in the spirit of the Old Testament, and most of it reads like a passage from the historical books of that ancient volume." Besides this consideration, there are no real coincidences between these Gentile myths

and the narratives of the Virgin Birth. It is only by verbal jugglery that parallels are effected. The celestial descent ascribed to heroes usually involves the amours of the gods. There has never been adduced an example of birth from a pure virgin. Even radical critics are forced to grant that pagan ideas, if adopted by the Evangelists, were changed out of all recognition. Then those who theorize that the Gospel birth-stories were inspired by heathen analogies forget that the sentiment of Jewish Christians regarding polytheistic paganism, and especially pagan birth mythology with its glorifying of sensual desire, can only have been that of the deepest abhorrence. That any members of the primitive Christian community would turn in that direction to derive therefrom the story of the birth of their holy Redeemer is inconceivable.

Contending that the Virgin Birth is not a loan from paganism, there are those who rate it a legend traceable to the famous Immanuel oracle in Isaiah (vii. 14). This is Dr. Harnack's guess. The Isaianic prophecy is the germ-cell of which our Infancy stories are the concrete outgrowths. Some Jewish-Christians found in that prophecy a productive hint that eventuated in two imagi-

nary accounts of the origin of Christ's earthly existence. But as against all who thus reason, there is not a shred of proof that up to the writing of Matthew's Gospel the passage in question was ever interpreted by the Jews in a Messianic sense, or that it was viewed as teaching the virgin birth of anyone. In harmony with this, it is entirely in keeping with the method of the first Evangelist that, when once he had come to know that the Messiah had been born of a virgin mother, he should have discovered in that arresting fact the ultimate fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. Thus it was the actual event of the Virgin Birth that illumined the prophecy, not the prophecy that suggested the fabrication of the Virgin Birth. In addition, there seems to have been no Jewish expectation that the Messiah's birth would be abnormal. Birth from a virgin mother would have been opposite to Hebrew ideas, for Israel held marriage in special honor as a Divine institution.

There are some other alleged prolific sources of the Christ birth-myth which are barely mentioned here. Dr. J. Estlin Carpenter and Prof. Lobstein refer us to Psalm ii. 7 ("This day have I begotten Thee"), together with the promise of Isaiah xi. 3 re-

garding the fulness of the Spirit that should rest on the Messiah. Dr. Pfleiderer seizes upon the Pauline phrasings "the second man is of heaven" (I Cor. xv. 49) and "the Son of God according to the spirit of holiness" (Rom. i. 4). Dr. Cheyne cites the allegoric woman in childbirth described in the Apocalypse (chap. xii). It really seems as if no absurdities are too great to be pressed into the service of those who deny what is written about our Lord's birth.

As pulverizing the doctrine of the myth-mongers in any of its forms, direct appeal may be made to the two Virgin Birth stories themselves. The impression they make is anything but that of a myth or legend. The simplicity, the conciseness, the restraint, the dignity, the exquisite refinement, the pure and beautiful reticence which clothe them are a far remove from the bizarre and often immoral Babylonian, or Greek, or Hindu narratives of unusual births. There is the same contrast with the apocryphal gospels of the Infancy, with their petty tattle, their indelicate allusions, and their ascetic exaggerations.*

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*The apocryphal gospels of the Infancy are **The Nativity of Mary, The Pseudo-Matthew, The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy, The Protevangelium of James, The Gospel of Thomas,** and **The History of Joseph.**

Further, the assured dating of our Gospels is far too early to permit mythical invention, especially in two individual forms. In an unprecedented way the supposed myth must have had its rise and acceptance within thirty or forty years after the death of Christ, at a time when the Virgin herself may have been still living. Moreover, if such a fiction had been in process of development during that interval, and had taken root in the convictions of any section of the Christian circle, it is impossible that Paul and the other apostles should not have heard of it. And what manner of men were they who artfully wove a garment of falsehood about the infant Jesus and then succeeded in foisting their concocted tales on the Church so early as to dominate its official records?

What, too, is to be said about the Evangelists inserting cunningly devised fables in their Gospels? Were Matthew and Luke incompetent, the gullible dupes of popular delusion? Take Luke. In the preface to his Gospel he states that he writes with the design of convincing his readers of the certainty of the things he recites, and he dwells on his care in getting full and precise information. He avers that he has traced the whole series of events "accurately from the first." With his professional training as a

physician he would not believe readily in a virginal birth; he would feel almost inevitably a repugnance to such a report and would be rigidly inquisitive about it before he gave it credence as a factual reality. For these reasons it is hard to imagine that Luke, whose accuracy has been tested severely in recent years, and not found wanting, should have admitted into his Gospel a spurious account of so momentous an occurrence as the human birth of our Lord. The likelihood is that he obtained the facts from Mary herself, either directly or indirectly. Sir W. M. Ramsay argues this at great length, and Dr. Sanday joins him.

To dodge the difficulty arising from the early date of the Gospels, that this left no time for creations of fancy to spring up, and the other difficulty of such creations passing muster with the Evangelists, the view has been advocated that the mythical birth stories were later than the Gospels and were stealthily introduced therein at some period during the second century. This makeshift is easily exploded. Besides what has been said already in disproof of interpolation, how could such tinkering with two of the canonical Gospels escape detection and protest in the Sub-apostolic Church, a Church which, as

we shall see, classed the Virgin Birth among the rudiments of the faith?

We are ready now for a summing up with reference to the myth-theory of the Virgin Birth. It is just a complex mass of bald assertions and far-fetched identifications, a baseless and preposterous speculation, without a leg to stand upon. The supporters of its various phases pour discomfiture and rout upon one another. That also it shuts out the barest admission of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the framing and character of the Gospel narrative is no small part of the indictment against it.

We notice next a variant reading in Matthew i. 16. In the Sinaitic-Syriac, a copy of the old Syriac version discovered at Sinai and published in 1894, the genealogy in Matthew is concluded with the following statement: "Joseph, to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin, begat Jesus, Who is called the Christ." This isolated reading cannot be taken as in any degree weakening the evidence of the manuscripts and other versions. The Syriac was translated from the Greek, and the Greek manuscripts do not hint at such a reading. The reading falls foul of itself, for in the same breath in which it says that "Joseph begat Jesus" it speaks of "Mary the Virgin." Moreover, the Sinaitic-Syriac

contradicts itself by retaining verses 18-20 in the same chapter, which record the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit and the refusal of Joseph to keep his troth with Mary till reassured by the angel. The reading is evidently an heretical corruption of relatively late origin. Some scribe, probably an Ebionite or a Cerinthian Gnostic, altered the text to get rid of the supernatural birth and the Deity of Jesus, but failed to touch verses 18-20. The variant made a stir when first published, but it has passed out of the realm of serious discussion.

To Prof. Clemen and others the unhistorical character of the Virgin Birth seems proved by Mary's judgment on her Son in Mark iii. 21, "He is beside Himself." It is understandable that the friends of Jesus, disappointed about His occupying Himself with lowly service, troubled at the excitement centering about Him, astounded at His clashing with the ecclesiastical rulers, should have resolved to put Him under restraint as being mad. But how would this be predicated of Mary if she was treasuring within her remembrance the Annunciation and the Miraculous Nativity? This objection to the Virgin Birth is quite gratuitous, revealing a very defective sense of what is possible mentally. It proceeds on the assumption that the

strange experiences of the Virgin at the conception of her Son would preserve her from all failure in faith and temper during thirty long subsequent years, that amid the routine of her commonplace, day-by-day existence she lived constantly in exalted recollection of the supernatural mode of her Son's birth, so that all doubt and questioning, and all maternal solicitude or vexation, were impossible. The argument takes no account of human nature. The same type of explanation applies to Mary's reproof of the boy Jesus in the Temple after the painful search which He had caused herself and Joseph. It is one of the marks of the authentic character of the Gospel narrative that these psychological contrasts and seeming inconsistencies are told fearlessly. There is no paring down of awkward happenings to gain credence. The story is told by men whose literary powers compel us to credit them with as keen an eye for incongruity as any of us possess. A plain statement of fact cannot be annulled by an appeal to consistency in so uncertain and shifty a factor as the human mind. The Gospels furnish many an example of the futility of expecting a properly correct result to follow invariably a given set of circumstances. John the Baptist, after seeing three wonders at the baptism of Jesus,

after bearing public testimony to the Lamb of God, suffered an eclipse of faith when languishing in prison. Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah did not hinder his violent remonstrance when Jesus spoke of His death. "Have I been so long time with you, and dost thou not know Me, Philip?" was a reproach —perhaps not unmixed with surprise—from One Who "knew what was in man." In the light of the foregoing the two episodes in Mary's life just now mentioned are not incompatible with the Virgin Birth.

Another occasion for attacking the Virgin Birth has been found in the fact that in the Gospels Jesus is called, without correction, the carpenter's son, the son of Joseph, and that several times Joseph and Mary are jointly named His parents. These modes of speech are employed not only by His countrymen and His disciples, but Luke the Evangelist speaks three times of the parents of Jesus, and once Mary herself is made to say, "Thy father and I." Well, what of it? In all this there is no real inconsistency with the Virgin Birth. The secret of Jesus' miraculous conception was for long jealously kept by Joseph and Mary. It could not be divulged to be met with incredulity and mockery. Never could Mary forget that dreadful day

when even Joseph, her espoused husband, had doubted her. And so, during His lifetime, Jesus was popularly regarded as Joseph's son by natural generation, the son of the man in whose house He grew up. This would be the thought of the immediate followers of Jesus, as well as of all others. The Gospels, therefore, simply report the current belief, simply record what was actually said about our Lord in the days of His flesh, and, for very natural reasons, Luke himself adopted these common sayings a few times in his personal narrative. As for Mary's remark to Jesus, "Thy father and I sought Thee sorrowing," Joseph stood to Jesus *in loco parentis*; he was His adoptive father, and performed all the duties of a father towards Him; and Mary would speak accordingly. How else within the family could Joseph be styled but the father of Jesus? The exceptional birth of Jesus would not be talked about before the other children, nor would Jesus Himself be told of it in boyhood.

We come next to the fallacious argument against the Virgin Birth narratives of Matthew and Luke based on the silence of Jesus concerning the mystery of His birth and the silence, or presumed silence, of the rest of the New Testament on the subject,—the

Gospels of Mark and John, the Acts, and the apostolic Epistles, especially those of Paul.

It is true that never, even within the circle of the apostles, His entourage, did Jesus make any allusion to the miracle of His origin. We do not know when or how He Himself became apprised of it. Though at twelve years of age He had the consciousness that God was His Father in a peculiar way, this sheds no light on the other question, nor is that question of any moment in this present connection. Regarding the silence of Jesus, it is absurd to say that this discredits the birth stories in Matthew and Luke. From the nature of the case Jesus could not but be silent. Before His resurrection the immature disciples could not have grasped the import of the Virgin Birth, nor utilized it, and He could scarcely be expected to broadcast the matter to the masses of the people, who remained unbelieving in spite of the signs wrought among them, and for whom the Virgin Birth would have been just one more stumbling-block. There were many instances when, in answer to the taunts of the Pharisees, it would have been timely for Him to have asserted His supernatural birth, but what good would it have done? What effect would the announcement have had upon those already blinded by prejudice ex-

cept to heighten that prejudice and place in their hands a weapon which could be used not only against Jesus, but against His household?

The silence of the first preachers of the Gospel, revealed in Acts, creates no problem. We must remember that the intelligence of the Virgin Birth broke out cautiously. During the life of Jesus there was absolute reticence on His part and also on Mary's. Only after the resurrection, wherein Jesus was declared to be the Son of God, would Mary be impelled to tell the transcendent fact, harmonizing as it did with what was then seen to be the majesty of the Master. The truth would be whispered first to some close friend in the company of women with whom the Virgin-Mother was familiar, and then to another and another. Presently the chiefs of the apostolic college would be told,—before all others John, in whose home Mary was sheltered. It is very doubtful, however, whether in the lifetime of Mary the Holy Conception was given publicity. Probably it was held confidentially within a very limited group so as to save Mary from scandalous misrepresentation, such as did actually arise when at length—perhaps in reply to some heresy—the Virgin Birth was made

known through oral teaching and the two narratives of Matthew and Luke. Under the circumstances why should it be expected that in primitive missionary preaching the Virgin Birth would be stressed or even mentioned? And, aside from prudential reasons, it was not within the field to which the apostles could bear personal witness and was no part of the evidence on which they themselves had believed. Their official testimony began, not with the birth of Jesus, but with the baptism of John (Acts i. 22). Further, the Virgin Birth was not in itself calculated to appeal to unbelieving Jews, for the Jewish Messianic hope included nothing of this kind, nor was it likely to inspire the right sort of ideas in unbelieving Gentiles, who would think of the wonder births of their mythologies. What was urged as the compelling proof of the supreme claims of Jesus was His teaching, His works, and His resurrection and exaltation.

If it be argued from the silence of the pioneer preachers of Christianity that the Virgin Birth is not an essential doctrine, that it was not used in apostolic days to arouse faith in the Saviour and promote edification, the answer is that it has not entered into ordinary preaching at any time

since, even though it has been received explicitly and cordially. The presentation of the gospel in the Acts is a practical treatment of saving truth, not requiring reference to the Virgin Birth. The same has ever held. The Virgin Birth has been almost unmentioned in the pulpits of the Church. Its value in doctrinal instruction and confirmation has not been questioned, but commonly the written record has been counted sufficient. There has always been present the reserve of a true delicacy which has refrained from invading this sanctum of the faith.

We are to consider next the silence of the other New Testament writers. Starting with the Second Gospel, the Virgin Birth lay entirely outside the scope of its design. Mark, writing for those of the Roman habit of mind, sought to portray Christ as the "Strong Son of God." He does not carry us behind the preaching of John the Baptist, but restricts himself to our Lord's public career. His omission of the Virgin Birth warrants, therefore, no adverse comment.

In the case of the Fourth Gospel several points demand attention. This Gospel is supplemental to the other three. Writing late in the first century, John was address-

ing readers familiar with the Virgin Birth as embodied in Matthew and Luke and as part and parcel of the tradition of the Church. Therefore it was not necessary to repeat the story. Secondly, in his matchless prologue, which occupies a structural place similar to that of the genealogy in Matthew's Gospel, John approaches the truth of the Incarnation from the Divine side purely, from the side of heaven, not of earth. In his profound theological contemplation of the Logos, the pre-existent Son of God, he takes us back into an unmeasured eternity and the recesses of the inner life of the Godhead. Here only is the radical significance of Christ laid bare. In such a lofty train of thought can it be insisted upon that a birth-narrative such as that in the two Synoptics must appear if John is to be rated as believing it? In his book *The Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ* Dr. Louis M. Sweet has shown that historically the miraculous birth of Jesus was simply an item in the larger controversy with Cerinthianism in which John was absorbed. The Virgin Birth was not denied except as a fraction of a larger denial. The controversy had to do with the reality of the Incarnation. There was no discussion of the Virgin Birth by itself. All who accepted the Incarnation accepted, as a matter of course,

the miraculous birth. Men accepted both together. When, therefore, John wrote the sentence, "the Word became flesh," he indorsed that entire organized and systematic Christology with which, in the mind of the early Church, the Virginal Birth was inseparably bound up. And then the Evangelist does make a covert allusion to the Virgin Birth in his description of those to whom the Incarnate Word has "given the right to become children of God." They are spoken of as "born, not of bloods, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." In that language John shuts out categorically and elaborately all the generative factors of human fatherhood. This immediately precedes his reference to the Incarnation, "the Word became flesh," and John's suggestion is that the spiritual birth of God's children is analogous to the supernatural birth of the Incarnate Logos. The apostle would hardly ascribe the incarnation of the Son of God to those very factors of natural birth which he expressly excludes from the begetting of the children of God. The three foregoing considerations strip the silence of the Fourth Gospel of any sinister significance and nullify the argument based thereon. It may be noted here that there is a remarkable reading in one copy of the Old Latin (b, Cod.

Veron.), where, after John has spoken of "believing in the name of Jesus Christ," he proceeds, "Who was born," etc. This reading in the singular number was known to Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and perhaps Hippolytus. With this reading there would be a direct reference to Christ's supernatural birth. But, though favored by Blass, Loisy, and Resch, it is undoubtedly wrong.

Coming to the New Testament Epistles, it is well known that they were produced in response to special occasion and that their writers are occupied in solving practical problems and contending for Christian principles, not in recalling historical details of our Lord's life. That being the case, no proof of their ignorance of the Virgin Birth, or of their disbelief in it, can be drawn from their silence. It simply does not come within the range of their purpose. Singling out Paul, it can be urged with great force that there is an antecedent certainty of his knowledge of the Virgin Birth through his intimacy with Luke, who was his companion and disciple. While nowhere in his extant letters does the apostle speak formally of the Virgin Birth, it may be fairly maintained that he makes statements which are consistent with, if not dependent upon, his acceptance of it. Dr.

H. B. Swete contends that the Virgin Birth lies in the background of Paul's doctrine of "the last Adam" and "the second man" (I Cor. xv. 45, 47). Also in Gal. iv. 4 the expression "born of a woman," literally "having become out of a woman," is in excellent accord with the miraculous conception of Jesus. What point would there be in emphasizing the birth of Jesus from a woman unless there was something singular about the woman's agency in the matter? If the birth were in the line of nature, the words would appear to be redundant. The phrase is not conclusive, but suggestive.

After this brief examination into the silence of the New Testament writers regarding the Virgin Birth, it is evident that adverse conclusions therefrom are gratuitous. This may be illustrated by a quotation from the editor of *The British Weekly*: "We have taken quite at random two volumes of sermons, one by Dr. Parker and the other by Mr. Spurgeon. It can be proved very easily that these eminent preachers fully accepted the fact of the Virgin Birth, but in the books we have examined we have not found any reference to the Virgin Birth. Dr. Parker's volume commences with a discourse on *Worshiping Christ,* which was preached

at Christmas, but he does not say that Christ was born of a virgin. Suppose no other writings of Dr. Parker and Mr. Spurgeon had come down to us, would it have been fair to argue that they did not know of, or that they did not believe in, the Virgin Birth?" Mere silence, if it can be satisfactorily accounted for, does not prove either lack of knowledge or denial; and indirect indications may often be shown to be present, when direct testimony is wanting. Had the writers of the New Testament used expressions inconsistent with the Virgin Birth, it would be a very serious matter; but there are none such.

There are those who take the stand that Christ's Davidic descent annuls the Virgin Birth, that this descent hinges on the real fatherhood of Joseph. The answer is that from the earliest period the testimony of the Church has been that Mary, as well as Joseph, was of David's family. This was something about which the apostles and early Christians could not well have been ignorant. If not founded in fact, it is difficult to see how such a belief could have become prevalent. Besides, there is substantial cause for holding that Luke gives the actual genealogy of Jesus through His mother. This

is maintained by Andrews, Ellicott, Godet, Lange, Plumptre, Robertson, Weiss, Wieseler, and many others.

In the argument for the historicity of the Virgin Birth the verisimilitude, the prima facie truthfulness, of the birth-story as it gathers about Mary in Luke's narrative deserves mention. Dr. James Orr has put this finely: "In these chapters we seem looking through a glass into Mary's very heart. Her purity of soul, her delicate reserve, her inspired exaltation, her patient committing of herself into God's hands to vindicate her honor, her deep, brooding, thoughtful spirit —how truth-like and worthy of the fact is the whole picture."

Crowning all that has been said, the miraculous birth of Jesus so tallies with the other facts of record that together they form a seamless, complete, and consistent whole. Passing the absolutely unprecedented life of the Master and His unapproachable traits, take His resurrection. Supernatural birth is a most credible and befitting preface to a life consummated by rising from the dead; nothing could be more intrinsically congruous. As in the resurrection the career of Jesus received its appropriate finale, so in the Virgin

Birth that career had its appropriate prelude.

Additional to what is Scriptural, it should be noted that the Virgin Birth belongs to that essential, permanent Christianity which is truly Catholic. It had a prominent place in the earliest traditions of the Church, reaching back to the very confines of the apostolic age. From the beginning of the second century on there was a consensus of belief on this subject among all the widespread and independent branches of the Christian Church. Evidence thereto appears in the epistles of Ignatius (who suffered martyrdom about A. D. 110), in the apologies of Aristides and Justin, and in the writings of Irenaeus (the disciple of Polycarp), Tertullian, Clement, and Origen. All this leads to the conclusion that the Virgin Birth came forward, at its first publication, with the highest possible credentials. Subsequently it was enshrined in the Old Roman Symbol, was written into the other Ecumenical Creeds, and was transferred thence into the Confessions of modern Christendom. Historically, therefore, it satisfies to the full the Vincentian canon concerning a valid tradition: "*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab*

omnibus"—whatever has been believed always, and everywhere, and by everybody.

This is the end of the matter. The Virgin Birth of Jesus is overwhelmingly attested. The negative critics are biased by their philosophical postulate of naturalism, and they are in a state of internecine conflict with one another. With Luke's personal guarantee of "certainty", and all the reinforcing considerations that accompany that guarantee, our attitude to the Virgin Birth should be that of full assurance. It is a constituent of the truth concerning which the apostle John wrote: "It shall be with us forever."

It may be stated incidentally that in the support of the Virgin Birth the citation of parthenogenesis (virgin-reproduction), or agamogenesis, is utterly irrelevant. Granted that in some of the lower orders of the biological series there is asexual reproduction, reproduction by means of unfertilized eggs, what has this to do with the Virgin Birth? The conception of Jesus was by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not by any kind of parthenogenesis in the scientific sense, was definitely a miracle, and not a natural anomaly. It was the Lord's doing, not Nature's. A number of conservative writ-

ers, driven by apologetic zeal, limp at this point.

It is now in order to consider briefly why there was in the case of Jesus such deviation from the law of natural birth. There are many who believe that the Miraculous Conception was a necessary condition of the Incarnation, that only thus could One Who became the God-man be born into the world. The only-begotten Son of God became flesh in such a manner as to secure that there would be nothing in His manhood destructive of His continued filial relation to God. Had He been born after the ordinary manner, from two human parents, He could never have been God incarnate; His personality would have been a human personality, even though inhabited by the Son of God. All this reasoning is finespun and hazardous. A little thought must convince us that we are not able to dogmatize as to what was necessary or possible in an event so sheerly unique as the Incarnation. In spite of His miraculous conception Jesus had a complete, not a partial, humanity, a normal, not an abnormal, humanity. He took to Himself of His Virgin-Mother all that belonged to the truth of manhood. He was "made like unto His brethren" just the same as if Joseph had

been His actual father. Further, the doctrine just reviewed does not agree with the fact that neither John nor Paul ever based the Incarnation on the Virgin Birth as its sine qua non.

There are others who explain that the Virgin Birth was required in order to separate Christ's humanity from the entail of sinfulness which is the universal inheritance of our race from Adam. Ordinary generation could not have issued in anything else than a morally contaminated, tainted personality. By the elimination of the paternal factor, by miraculous conception, by virgin birth, Jesus escaped all inherited tendency to sin; the fatal link of heredity was broken. In proof of this the angel's annunciation is cited—"the holy thing which is begotten." From this we dissent. There is no satisfaction whatever in making the Virgin Birth a necessary presupposition of the sinless character of Jesus. To bring physiology over into dogma, to make the original holiness of Jesus depend on a physical, material miracle, is a more than doubtful proceeding. After all, the human factor in the birth of Jesus was only halved, not abolished. The influence of the father upon the child is slight compared with the sovereign influence of the mother

during the period of gestation. Unless the Roman Catholic decree of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is accepted, the Maiden Mother was subject to original depravity and indwelling sin. In her maternal function, therefore, she must have contributed of her sinful nature to Jesus had not the dynamic and ethical work of the Holy Spirit intervened. That being so, the cleansing power of God could have barred the transmission of sinful propensity just as well had the paternity of Joseph been involved. Under God's sexual ordinance why should fatherhood, more than motherhood, have so threatened the spotless sanctity of Jesus that a virgin conception was the only safeguard? Then there is no New Testament passage that suggests in any exclusive way a causal connection between the miraculous birth of Jesus and His immaculate holiness. Indeed Paul does not even mention such a connection. He is the only New Testament writer who developed the doctrine of original depravity inherited by the race through Adam's fall, and he never felt it necessary to trace the sinlessness of Christ to His exemption from the law of ordinary generation. In Luke's Annunciation story it is practically certain that the phrase "the holy thing" is not in the predicate of the clause.

See the American Standard text and margin. If it is not in the predicate, it has no special emphasis. Waiving this, while the "overshadowing of the Most High" had as its necessary sequence "the holy thing which is begotten" ("wherefore also"), it is not at all indicated that the method followed was of such an absolute type that holiness was bound up with a virgin birth as against a normal birth conditioned and guarded by the controlling power of God.

Dismissing the foregoing interpretations of the Virgin Birth, it is fully justified as the signal of Incarnation. "It became Him" Who was in the beginning with God that His entry into the world should be marked by miracle. Weigh the tremendous, the ineffable, the infinite significance of the Incarnation—the most transcendent of all events even when the possibilities of the measureless future are taken into account. The Eternal Son of God, rooted in the very constitution of the Godhead, by Whom all things were made, "came down from heaven" to be the Mediator between God and man, to be the Revealer of God and the Redeemer of sinners. In pursuance of His mission He united Himself to us by "partaking of flesh and blood." If miracle was ever in place as

manifesting the "finger of God," was there not an exquisite fitness, an inherent fitness, in the providential ordering that the Advent of the Son of God should be signalized within itself by the extraordinary? To have had the Incarnation actualized by ordinary parentage would have been as unreasonable as to have the sun rise without declaring itself in light and heat. The moment of conception was the moment of the Incarnation, and just there the unique miracle of the Virgin Birth entered and a Divine paternity was substituted for a human. While through Mary Jesus was vitally incorporated with our race and, without sin, inherited our entire humanity, He had a paternity befitting a life indwelt with all the fulness of the Godhead. Surveying the breadth and length and height and depth of the Incarnation, must we not say that it would have been unnatural if the birth of the Saviour had been natural?

And now a concluding word about the importance of affirming the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. It is urged that, like the earliest Christians, we too can acknowledge the Deity of Christ, and therefore the Incarnation, independently of the manner of His human birth. The answer is not difficult. The conditions under which we own our

Lord's claims are not the same as those of primitive days. The fact of the Virgin Birth, then unknown, was disclosed when the fulness of the time came, and centuries of reflection and criticism have elapsed. As soon as it was published, the Virgin Birth was recognized, formally and officially recognized, as a befitting and convincing sign of the entrance of the Son of God into humanity. It was seen that it stood related to the Incarnation as a key to its lock. For this reason it has been felt, and rightly, that to reject such a sign must weaken belief in the Incarnation. This is borne out by the fact that those who refuse to accept the Virgin Birth have, as a rule, fallen short of a proper acknowledgment of the sacred mystery with which it is tied up. Theoretically it is granted that a man may doubt or deny the Virgin Birth without, in his own mind, denying the Incarnation or the Deity of Christ. And yet he has hoodwinked himself. He has taken a position which he cannot long maintain. The Deity of Christ and the Incarnation are woven together with the Virgin Birth, so that none can successfully maintain any one of them without maintaining all. This is the lesson which history teaches. In recent years it has become increasingly evident. Those in the Christian ranks who

disbelieve the Virgin Birth are in other respects also adherents of the New Theology. They mostly doubt or deny the physical resurrection of Jesus and they define the Incarnation and the Deity of our Lord in a different way from that of the Creeds, in a false and deceptive way. Furthermore, the discrediting on speculative and conjectural grounds of the well-established testimony of the First and Third Gospels regarding the Virgin Birth is itself a perilous proceeding in that it involves unfaithfulness to the fundamental principle of the supreme objective authority of the Scriptures. The step is big with consequences as a rationalistic departure from what is clearly written, pointing the way to the acceptance of only those Biblical teachings and affirmations that accord with personal presuppositions.

In the light of the foregoing it is the duty of the Church to contend earnestly for this article, as for every other article, of the Faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints.

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